

Meeting the Tender Shepherd

Psalm 23; John 10:22-30

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A few years ago, the *New York Times* ran an article titled “Googling for God.” The author researched Google search data related to questions people were asking about God. He found that the number one question people were asking on Google about God is this: “Who created God?” Okay, apparently we have a lot of inquisitive minds. That’s good. Not surprisingly, the number two question about God is this: “Why does God allow suffering?” We’ve been asking that question for ages and will continue to do so, I’m sure. The question that shocked and saddened me is the third. It tells me that we have internalized false, damaging images of God. The third most asked question about God on Google is this: “Why does God hate me?” (by Seth Stephens-Davidowitz)

That’s painful, isn’t it? I could sense some of you wince as I said it. Why does God hate me? That comes from a deeply wounded place.

The author also researched a related question. It’s a fill in the blank: “What is the most common word to complete the following question: Why did God make me _____?” The number one word by far is “ugly.” The number two word is “gay.” Number three is “black.”

He argues, rightly I believe, that these questions are related. Why does God so hate me that God would make me ugly? That God would make me gay? That God would make me black? As a minister of the gospel, simply as a man of faith, I find this to be terribly upsetting. People turn to Google, an anonymous source of information, to ask their most honest questions. They wouldn’t ask me. They wouldn’t ask you. They wouldn’t ask their physician. But they’re asking Google. What these questions tell me is that we have failed utterly at teaching the world about God, and that failure has damaged the souls of men and women. No matter how many times I say, “God is love,” the questions people are really asking indicate that they think God is primarily a

judgmental, capricious tyrant who hates some people and who makes some people ugly.

We have only ourselves to blame, I'm afraid. We have attributed countless atrocities to God: devastating hurricanes, wars, disease, terrorist acts, floods, and so many others. Why would God cause or even allow such things? Well, we have our answers. They are God's punishment, of course. Punishment because of our wrongdoing. Punishment because of our sin. Punishment, we have said, we deserve. We have created in the minds and hearts of people an image of a god, mean and vindictive, that does not exist. But that fictitious image is powerful. It has caused deep anxiety, self-loathing, and unnecessary fear. It has caused a lot of people conclude: God hates me and has made me ugly.

Today I want to hold before you another image of God. Meet the tender shepherd from Psalm 23. The tender shepherd, who provides for his sheep. Who insists that they rest in green pastures, drink from still waters. The tender shepherd, who restores the sheep and keeps them on right paths. Meet the tender shepherd from Psalm 23, who truly loves his sheep. This psalm has been called "an American *secular* icon" (William L. Holladay), a piece of religious literature that has made its way into the vernacular. Everyone recognizes Psalm 23, right? Then why hasn't the image of the tender shepherd taken root in the human psyche?

I think I know why. Roberta Bondi describes it in one of her books. She was our Williams lecturer five years ago. She's a professor in Atlanta. She recounts visiting her grandparents' farm in Union County, Kentucky. She was nine years old. It was revival time at Pond Fork Baptist Church, the small, white frame church her grandparents and aunts attended. It was July. Sweltering heat. Brother Smith was the revival preacher. His text was the story of the rich fool who tore down his barns and built larger barns to house his vast wealth. Brother Smith told the story in detail, reminding the congregation that the rich fool had forgotten God. He had forgotten that God could strike him down at any moment, him or anyone sitting there in Pond Fork Baptist Church, even a nine-year-old girl.

Roberta remembered the three points of Brother Smith's sermon. Point number one: they were all hopeless sinners and deserved hell and the cruel devil that awaited them. Someone from the congregation shouted, "God forbid!" Point number two, said in a whisper: a few of them were lucky because God might show mercy upon them. Someone shouted, "Lord-a-mercy!" Finally the preacher's last point, said with sweat dripping from his brow: they must "repent and believe the Good News of Jesus Christ."

There was an altar call, Roberta writes. They sang, "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling." Roberta says that she was "frightened nearly out of my mind." She sat between two of her aunts and held her face in her hands. She repented and repented, she says, "in great waves of stomach wrenching fear, as though I were throwing up."

At age nine, she had believed "every single bit of the Bad News of Jesus Christ without question, about my sinfulness, about my death, which I knew was as likely to come on me at an unexpected moment as the barn builder's had been to come upon him, and about God's terrible, waiting, predestined judgment."

Here is her reflection upon what that night did to her:

What I couldn't believe was the rest. Gritting my teeth and trying as I might, I couldn't believe God loved me; I couldn't believe God wanted to save me; and I couldn't believe that I could believe. With my nine-year-old hands over my nine-year-old face, I combed out my heart with a lice-comb for a single sign that I believed could save me, but I found nothing. I knew I was among the damned.

(In Ordinary Time: Healing the Wounds of the Heart, pp. 178-183)

That's why. That's why people think God hates them. That's why people think God made them ugly.

Imagine how differently that night could have been had Brother Smith introduced them to the tender shepherd from Psalm 23. The tender shepherd, who provides for his sheep. Who insists that they rest in green pastures, drink from still waters. The tender shepherd, who

restores the sheep and keeps them on right paths. Imagine how differently it could have been had he invited them to meet the tender shepherd, who truly loves his sheep.

Some of us grew up in a church like Pond Fork Baptist Church. We grew up with a steady diet of sermons like that one. It has taken some of us a lifetime to undo that. If you are still struggling with that image of God, please meet the tender shepherd from Psalm 23. I've taken the liberty of translating this psalm into contemporary language. I hope this is helpful.

*God is my shepherd,
and that's all I really need.
Because God requires that I rest in the green grass;
And because God leads me to tranquil, calming waters.
God fills me up and restores me fully and regularly.
God leads me to do the right things simply
because they are the right things.
On those occasions when I feel threatened by dark forces,
I do not worry.
I know that you, my tender shepherd, are present,
and I take comfort in that.
You have prepared an extravagant feast for me to eat
while my detractors watch;
You have covered my body with soothing lotion;
I am filled to overflowing with joy.
I know beyond doubt that God is good
and that God's mercy rests upon me
every moment of the day.
And then one day, when my time on earth is done,
I will live in my tender shepherd's home
forever and ever.*

Meet the tender shepherd who truly loves his sheep. Meet God who loves you and thinks you are beautiful. And let's tell the world about this tender shepherd, until the number one question people are asking about God on Google is this: Why did God make me so beautiful and so beloved?

Closing Prayer

We have gotten much wrong, Lord. Help us to get this much right: Jesus loves the little children of the world, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Amen